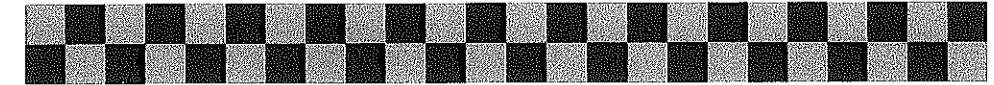


The
Vicious
Cycle of
Abundance
and
Want.

AN EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF LOUIS ROU'S
"A PROSPECT OF CHESS-PLAY AND CHESS-PLAYERS"

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In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes how virtues and vices are not, as commonly believed, opposite ends of the same spectrum (Books III and IV). Rather, each virtue is flanked by a pair of vices—one an excess of the virtue, the other a deficiency in it. For example, the virtue of generosity can degenerate into profligacy (too much of the good thing) or stinginess (too little of it). In his mid-1730s Neo-Latin poem, "A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players, at the Coffeehouse, New York," Reverend Louis Rou playfully dramatizes the ease in which he and his circle fall prey to such extremes during their favorite pastime, chess.¹ In the process, the poet both captures the uniquely communal dimension of Neo-Latin verse in British America while meriting a special place in history as the first extant mention of chess in American literature.

The Poet, Louis Rou (1684-1750)

The poem is contained in the appendix to a Scottish manuscript of *Poems on Several Occasions* by Archibald Home (c.1705-1744), who served as the secretary of New Jersey. The poems probably were collected at his death by Abigail Streete Coxe of Trenton and circulated as a manuscript book (Shields 264). Home, a younger son of Sir John Home, baronet of Berwick, came to New York in the early 1730s. The earliest poems of the manuscript, including Rou's "Prospect," date from the mid-1730s when Home was frequenting the taverns and coffeehouses of New York City and began gathering around him a very cosmopolitan circle who shared an interest in *belles lettres* (Shields xxv). As Shields argues in *Civil Tongues*, colonial coffeehouses and the literature they produced possessed a sophistication unique to such public venues due both to their being frequented by men of the commercial and propertied classes as well as their immediate access to the latest news from abroad brought in by merchant ships (59-61). Home's group, for example, included the aforementioned Coxe, merchant Moses Franks (who appears in lines 49-51 of the poem), Trenton's sheriff David Martin, Attorney General Joseph Warrell, New Jersey Chief Justice Robert Hunter Morris, and Louis Rou, the minister of the French Church in New York City.

Born in Paris and educated at Leyden, Louis Rou served as minister of the French Church in New York from around 1710 until his death in 1750. As its minister, Rou was at the center of both "the greatest [days] in the history" of the French Church of *Saint Esprit*" (Maynard 121-122) and the internal dispute that was responsible for the "collapse...of [New York's] last independent Huguenot congregation" (Butler 194). Besides being known for his learning, he was recognized for his enthusiasm for chess, which he, as one acquaintance suggested, "perhaps was too fond of" (Fiske, "Lost" 13). It even has been suggested that "Rou taught many citizens the game of chess" (Maynard 135). And, while "A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players" clearly testifies to his love of the game and hints at the pedagogue in him, it also contradicts the assertion made by Church of *Saint Esprit* historian John Maynard that Rou "probably...ceased to write poems after he entered the ministry" (129). Indeed, this poem would make history.

"A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players"

Rou's "Prospect," which Shields characterizes as a "chain epigram" (61), a genre not uncommon in the Anglo-Latin tradition, might even more precisely be categorized, due to its very inconsistent meter and rhyme, as an example of coenosomatous verse, i.e., couplets that share "certain words and syllables" (Binns 51). "Prospect," for example, displays pairs, such as lines 17-18 and 56-57, which have as many as eight syllables in common.

In light of such generic identifications, coupled with the insider's view of the personalities, preferences, and habits of the denizens of one particular New York coffeehouse,² the poem would appear to epitomize the coterie dimension that many critics assign to Neo-Latin. Various terms have been used to describe this "coterie language" (Wiesenthal 24), a *vers de societe* (Lemay 294), or merely one more example of baroque *posie precieuse* (Segal 103; Forster 47), the Neo-Latin poetic tradition, according to these critics, has exemplified from its beginnings:

a literature which arises in small groups of

cultivated people and which aims at producing an elegant intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, without endangering the civilized atmosphere essential to the group. (Forster 47-48)

Such a literary group, in turn, is a polite society in which "the blessings of culture and civilization can be enjoyed without intrusion of the most troublesome problems of the age" (Mourges 115). As described by Shields, the "homosociality" of the coffeehouse culture in America corresponds perfectly to the social milieu that these critics argue fostered most American Neo-Latin versification (59).

However, unlike most Neo-Latin poetry from both sides of the Atlantic that tends to have quite specific (and quite classical) models upon which it is based, Rou's poem displays a rather distinctive, albeit lively, Latinity. Indeed, the unevenly clipped verses and jaunty rhyming seem to be more kindred in spirit—though clearly not a direct descendant—of medieval goliardic poetry than any traditional Golden or Silver Age poets, with whom Rou's sermons demonstrate a great familiarity (Maynard 124).³ The uniqueness of his versifying is even more evident in the fact that, due to the unfamiliar terminology used, the poet himself finds it necessary to offer immediate glosses for his Latin renderings of "backgammon" (35) and "giving check" (44). And it is the unconventionality of Rou's poem that highlights one of the major differences in Neo-Latin in the British colonies from its predecessor in the Old World: an eager invitation to participate—or at least to watch.

While it is true that most, if not all, of American Neo-Latin poets were college graduates, and that it was during their college years that many of them "underwent an intense internalization and identification with the classical tradition" (Eadie 87), it is equally true that exclusivity in their verse (in either design or performance) seems far from intentional. For contrary to the depiction of early American Neo-Latin as a *langue speciale*, which by definition is exclusionary (Rosenwald 314-315), most American Neo-Latin poetry, due to its circula-

tion history and occasional character, seems open to wider diffusion and often displays a distinct eagerness for public participation. For while all Neo-Latin verse, with its allusive dimension, displays the tendency toward eliciting the reader's participation to some degree, only the Anglo-American variety (typified by a decided preference for manuscript circulation and/or immediate publication in broadsides and newspapers together with the almost complete avoidance of more lapidary anthologies) manifests the attribute so thoroughly.

Admittedly not everyone would be willing (or even able) to read, much less write, the Neo-Latin verse circulating in the colonies, which is the origin of the coterie criticism. Rou's well-known erudition, after all, benefited from his owning "the best private library in New York" (Maynard 126). Nonetheless, due to the prominence of Neo-Latin verse in all of the popular American periodicals of the day (not infrequently placed on the first page of a newspaper just below the banner, for example), and, more importantly, the regular calls for translation (or, as in Rou's poem, the instantaneous glosses by the poet himself), there is every indication that a very different aesthetic is being invoked here, one quite unlike what Lawrence Rosenwald has termed a "thieves' argot" (314). Not appealing to only those educated few, as in Europe, who would purchase a bound anthology of Neo-Latin verse, this poetry, by being scattered amidst the news of the day (or aimed at capturing the boisterous activity in their midst) actively engages.

The poem, according to the title, is a prospect poem, which, in the tradition of Denham's "Cooper's Hill" and Gray's "Ode on the Distant Prospect of Eton College," usually suggests a view from above. At the same time, however, far from depicting the traditional solitary observer of a landscape, Rou's couplets acknowledge the presence of several audiences throughout. The readers, thus welcomed to look over the poet's shoulder, as it were, are directed to look not only at how the players play—and how, at times, they even crowd each other (50-51)—but also at our noisy nosy selves watching those same players

play (13-15). We thus become the observers and the observed simultaneously...all inextricably linked together with the players (60).

Even granting such peculiarities (or, more harshly, such weaknesses), the glimpse that the Huguenot minister's poem offers of the animated nature of both American Neo-Latin verse in major colonial cities (Ijsewijn 291) and of the colonial coffeehouse scene makes it a more than worthy of a full edition and translation.

Yet there is another reason. "The Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess Players, at a Coffeehouse, New York," composed by Rou circa 1735, seems to rewrite a small piece of literary history by becoming the earliest known literary mention of chess in America, a distinction previously granted to none other than Benjamin Franklin (Fiske, *First* 331). Franklin's place in chess history has traditionally been linked to his "The Mōrals of Chess" published in 1786 or several chess references, dating back to 1734, in his *Autobiography*—which he only began writing in 1771 and which remained unfinished at his death in 1790 (Hagedorn 30). This poem, composed by Rou circa 1735, thus predates Franklin by no fewer than thirty-five years.

More significant, if not ironic, is Louis Rou's already being rather famous, in certain circles, for a 1734 "lost manuscript" on chess that, should it ever be discovered, already has been hailed "the earliest composition on chess in America" (Klahre, "Reverend" 75). While this poem could never have been mistaken for the "Critical Remarks upon the *Letter to the Craftsman on the Game of Chess*," which has been described as "a thin quarto of twenty-four closely written pages and divided into seventeen short, numbered chapters or sections" (Fiske, "Lost" 6), the poem's existence certainly adds weight to the argument that, if anyone at the time could and would have written such an essay, it must have been Louis Rou. Considering all of the discussion concerning the historical significance of the lost essay, it is surprising that Rou's poem about his avocation never has been mentioned. The present edition happily fills the gap.

A PROSPECT OF CHESS-PLAY AND CHESS-PLAYERS, AT THE COFFEEHOUSE NEW YORK⁴

By the Revd Mr. Louis Row, Minister of the French Church

- Omne nimium vertitur in Vitium
Quare Causa nostrorum Miseriarum
Est nimis multum⁵ et nimis parum.
- De Loco, Coffee House*
5 Nimis multum Spectatorum
Nimis parum Consideratorum.⁶
- Aliud de Eodem*
Nimis multum Stridoris et Rumoris,
Nimis parum Silentii⁷ et Tranquillitatis.
- 10 *Aliud*
Nimis multum de Lusu et Otiis⁸
Nimis parum de Negotiis.
- The Spectators*
Nimis multum de Loquacitate
15 Nimis parum de Taciturnitate.
- The Players*
Nimis multum de Permutatione
Nimis parum de Schemate et Ludendi Ratione.
- De Lusu*
20 Nimis multum Tadii et Perturbationis
Nimis parum Voluptatis et Delectationis.
- The Chief Justice, Delancey*⁹
Nimis multum de Conciliis
Nimis parum de Auxiliis.
- 25 *Mr. Murray*
Nimis multum de Cogitationibus
Nimis parum de Bonis Operationibus.
- Alias*¹⁰
Nimis multum de Cogitatione et Hesitatione
30 Nimis parum de Actu et Operatione.
- Capt. Riggs, and Mr. Pachevell*¹¹
Nimis multum de Celeritate
Nimis parum de Sagacitate.
- Mr. De Peister*
35 Nimis multum de Futellis...Backgammon
Nimis parum de Schacchiis.
- Mr. Kennedy*
Nimis multum de Vanitate
Nimis parum de Sinceritate.
- 40 *Mr*
Nimis multum de Iracundia
Nimis parum de Prudentia et Facundia.
- Mr. Charles Home*¹²
Nimis multum de Sacchiis...giving Check
45 Nimis parum de Capite et Diviliis.
- Aliud*
Nimis multum de Corporis Motione
Nimis parum de Actu et Penetratione.
- Mr. N and Mr. Franks*¹³
50 Nimis multum de Loculis
Nimis parum de Bonis Oculis.¹⁴
- The Author*
Nimis multum de Scientia
nimis parum de Patientia.
- 55 *Aliud de Eodem*
Nimis multum de Speculatione
Nimis parum de Usu et Exercitatione.
- Itaque*
60 Per hoc fatale nimis multum et nimis parum
Saepe simus servi spectantium turbarum,
Multi sunt incommodi, alii commodi parum,
Per hoc nimis parum, nimis multum
Fuit, est, et erit, nostrum Shaki¹⁵ ludium stultum.
- FINIS*

A PROSPECT OF CHESS-PLAY AND CHESS-PLAYERS, AT THE COFFEEHOUSE NEW YORK

By the Revd Mr. Louis Row, Minister of the French Church

- All abundance transforms to vice
because our sufferings have as their source
both "too too little" and "too too much."¹⁶
- Mr. DePeister*
35 Too much backgammon
Too little chess.
- Concerning The Place, The CoffeeHouse*
5 Too many spectators
Too few strategists.
- Another on the Same*
Too much noise
Too little poise.¹⁷
- 10 *Another*
Too much playfulness
Too little earnestness.
- The Spectators*
Too much discussion
15 Too little peace.
- The Players*
Too much substitution
Too little preparation.
- Concerning the Game*
20 Too much tedium
Too little joy.
- The Chief Justice, Delancey*
Too much advice
Too little help.
- 25 *Mr. Murray*
Too much deliberation
Too little action.
- Another*
Too much delaying
30 Too little doing.
- Capt. Riggs, and Mr. Pachevell*
Too much speed
Too little insight.
- Mr. DePeister*
35 Too much backgammon
Too little chess.
- Mr. Kennedy*
Too much falsity
Too little truth.
- 40 *Mr.—*
Too much anger
Too little prudence.
- Mr. Charles Home*
Too much checking
45 Too little mating.
- Another*
Too much movement
Too little penetration.
- Mr. N and Mr. Franks*
50 Too much crowding
Too little observing.
- The Author*
Too much knowledge
Too little patience.
- 55 *Another on the Same*
Too much speculation
Too little application.
- And thus:*
Through this fatal abundance and lack
60 may we often be our audience's hacks.
Many are troublesome, others only less.
But throughout this want and great excess
There was, is, and always will be our silly game of Chess.
- The End*

Notes

- ¹ That Rou was well-versed in the Greek philosophers (and a wide array of other ancient authors) can be deduced readily from the abundant and detailed citations and quotations from them in his sermons (Maynard 124).
- ² Maynard places the coffeehouse at a location "on Broadway, near the present City Hall" (135).
- ³ Such familiarity with Latin poetry also suggests that Rou's occasional lapse in grammar or vocabulary is due more to hasty composition than any lack of appreciation for the subtleties of Latin versification.
- ⁴ I am indebted to David Shields, Professor of American Literature at The Citadel, for very generously sharing the microfilm reproduction of the manuscript with me and for supplying, where possible, the identities of the people mentioned in the poem. I could not have completed the project without his invaluable assistance. Many thanks are also due to the Reverend Nigel Massey of the French Church of Saint Esprit in New York City; Jo Anne Fatherly of the United States Chess Federation in New Windsor, New York; and Eric Roth, the archivist at the Huguenot Historical Society in New Paltz, New York. During his insightful discussion of the place of coffeehouses and taverns in the creation and circulation of eighteenth-century colonial American literature in *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America*, David S. Shields offers a brief excerpt from a Neo-Latin poem, "A Prospect of Chess-Play and Chess-Players, at the Coffeehouse, New York by the Reverend Mr. Louis Row, Minister of the French Church" (61). The present article offers the first full edition and translation of that poem which, dating from around 1735, merits a special place in American literary and chess history.
- ⁵ The more idiomatic expression is *nimum multa*, "too much." There seems to be no precedent for the oxymoronic *nimis parum*, literally "too much too little."
- ⁶ The editor has regularized the punctuation and capitalization in the poem.
- ⁷ More correctly, the genitive singular would be *silenti*.
- ⁸ The poet inexplicably switches from the more compact and idiomatic "genitive of plenty or want" construction to a less satisfactory *de* + ablative. He continues his use of the latter approach for the remainder of the poem, except in lines 20-21. Since it seems clear that the poet simply equates the two constructions, the translator has opted to ignore the shift in the translation.
- ⁹ James Delancey was Chief Justice of New York from 1733-1761.
- ¹⁰ As Rou had used throughout the rest of the poem, *Aliud*, "another," would have been preferable.
- ¹¹ This Pachelbel is a son of the composer of the "Canon."
- ¹² Charles seems to be unrelated to Archibald.
- ¹³ Mr. Moses Franks, who would become one of the great merchants of the British Empire, also contributed two prefatory poems for Home's *Poems for Several Occasions*.
- ¹⁴ This couplet is problematic in its vagueness. *Loculus*, *-i* literally means a "small place, coffin, or bier." In the plural it can, however, mean "purses." *Bonis Oculis*, literally, "good eyes," however, has no apparent idiomatic meaning.
- ¹⁵ This represents the third different Latin spelling of chess or a chess-related word in the poem. This corresponds well, however, to the inconsistent orthography in a variety of Neo-Latin texts on chess: Jacobus de Cessolis's *De ludo scacorum*, Marco Girolamo Vida's *De ludo scacchorum*, and Thomas Hyde's *Madratorias, seu, Historia Sbabihudii*, among others.
- ¹⁶ The poet emphasizes the characteristic excesses of the coffeehouse by modifying both *multum* (*n.* plenty, a large amount) and *parum* (*n.* an insufficient amount, too little), two words that in themselves denote excessive abundance and lack, respectively, with *nimis* (*indecl.* an excessive amount, too much). The resulting excess has been rendered by the very extreme "too too...."
- ¹⁷ While the Latin poet reveals throughout the poem a decided preference for pleonastic doublets, something not inappropriate to the theme of the poem, the translator has aimed at concision in the rendering. The translation also attempts to reflect the very occasional rhymes and half rhymes of the original.

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